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## PHILOSOPHIC FAITH.\*

OUR age is an age of criticism. Not merely the philosopher, but "the man in the street," assumes, as by second nature, a sceptical attitude. We are tentative; we demand proof; we appeal to experience; we question authority. The old, easy acquiescence through custom or indifference has been shaken; consent and belief wait upon conviction. Credulity has diminished; respect for science has increased. But the spread of positive knowledge is slow, and the human spirit cannot sustain itself upon a bare interrogation. Scepticism, therefore, too often degenerates into a positive denial issuing in a new dogmatism, or it drifts, through the habitual ignoring of certain fundamental realities of life, into an unconsciousness of, or even disbelief in, their existence, and this, though these realities may be such that life would not be worth living without them, or without them would even be impossible.

When a clear conception of habitually ignored realities concerns only philosophy, we may, for the present, and so far as this occasion is concerned, acquiesce in the ignorance. But when the realities habitually ignored are the very breath of life of every one of us, when to doubt is to faint by the way, when to disbelieve is to paralyze all action and all thought, then it is time that the popular criticism that has seemed to throw discredit on so fundamental a necessity of life should be pushed a little farther, and that the danger of a little knowledge should be overcome by the homœopathic cure of a little more.

One of the fundamental necessities of life, on which a too shallow criticism has thrown a paralyzing discredit, is religious faith. There are many among the more enlightened and more earnest who have come to believe a rational religious faith to be impossible; there are many more, among

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\* Given as a lecture before the London Ethical Society.

orthodox Christians, who hold a conception of religious faith which is wholly irrational, and therefore wholly impossible to any enlightened human being. But these two groups of persons, intensely opposed to one another, as each believes, are, nevertheless, at bottom making one and the same mistake. Each group is misapprehending the nature of religious faith ; their misapprehensions, moreover, are identical.

What, then, is religious faith ? I shall try, as far as I can in popular language, to give the answer of idealistic philosophy to this question. It would be interesting (and necessary in order to give that answer fully) to connect the faith which is at once the condition and product of the moral life with that faith which is the condition and product of the intellectual life, and with that which is similarly related to the life of the artist. These three are but different aspects of one and the same attitude of mind and heart. But in the space at my disposal I shall necessarily confine myself almost wholly to the first of these.

What do we mean by religion ? We mean a man's consciousness of his relation as a human being (*i.e.*, as a thinking, willing, being) to the world or system of things in which he finds himself; we mean his devotion to the best he knows in himself and in that world. Such a consciousness implies, at its fullest, a philosophy of life, and is capable of using all knowledge as means to its development and enlightenment. But it is also a consciousness which is possessed in its essence by the humblest being who is capable of morality. The human mind is one, and the impulse that issues in the profoundest philosophies is but the fuller development of the self-same faculty which enables a man to know so simple a matter as that he will want a good dinner every day, and which enables him to will to work in order to provide himself with those dinners. In other words, each of these two persons—the philosopher, on the one hand, and the man who lays his plan to provide for his dinners, on the other—believes the world to be an ordered system which he can, at least to some extent, understand, and over which, therefore, he has, to a greater or less extent, power. The man who

plans to provide himself with dinners believes that recurring hunger will be a characteristic of his life. He believes that certain stuffs which we call food will continue to satisfy that hunger; he believes, if he be a member of a civilized community, that there exists an organization of society, in virtue of which a certain amount of work can be exchanged for a certain amount of money or of food-procuring power, and he determines to find that work and procure that food. Now, this simple fact, that a man can and does lay a plan by which he may provide himself with food for a week or a day, involves within itself belief in a continuous order or system in the world in which he finds himself, and belief in himself as bound up with that order, as being acted upon by it, and as reacting on it.

It makes no difference to my point if the man's plan fails. He would not on that account be justified in concluding that no plan could have succeeded. If he fails, his hunger will remind him disagreeably of how certainly he can rely on the permanence of at least some human characteristics. Even if we are forced to conclude that in his circumstances no man could have laid a plan which would have issued in success, still, we are not justified in concluding that the universe is a chaos. If it were a chaos, that is, if things had no permanent characteristics, the man might have eaten a stone, or have forbidden himself to grow hungry. But it may be said, "That is nonsense." It *is* nonsense. A reduction to absurdity is absolutely the only alternative left us if we deny the order of the universe. There must be an order even to make failure possible. We cannot lose a game except there are laws of the game, constituting it a game, and making success possible. We cannot even *think* that there is no order in the universe, except by virtue of the order that enables us to think.

We may then perhaps take it for granted that there is an order in the universe, and that practical belief in it is implied in our every thought and every act. In every thought, I say, as well as in every act. For the initial act in all thought, even in perception, is *attention*, and attention is an act of faith,

that is, it implies the practical belief that there is something to be attended to, something real, something that can be known. Without this belief we should never attend to anything, and without attention we should never perceive anything, never think anything.

But practical belief is one thing and conscious joyous assurance is another. Two truths grow clearer and clearer as the world grows older and the human mind penetrates farther into its meaning. One is that the universe is an ordered whole; and the other is that, being an ordered whole, it must necessarily be good, and we may therefore trust the soul of it. But the stage which we have reached in our argument is a long way off these shining heights. These mark our goal.

We are, however, I hope, agreed, that a practical belief in the order of the universe is involved in every thought and act. Now this practical belief is faith. It means that we reckon on finding things pretty much as we have found them hitherto. It means that we are convinced that, if we find unexpected changes, those changes are connected in some way with what went before, "they have been *caused*," we say. And this means that we have a practical belief, that is, a belief on which our action depends, in something which cannot be presented to sense, and this is Faith. Faith is *not* opposed to reason. It is not credulity. It is not a capacity for believing on authority something which contradicts experience or knowledge.

If you say to me, "But that which the churches call faith is opposed to reason, it is a capacity for believing that which contradicts experience and organized knowledge," then I can only say, if that is so, so much the worse for what the churches call Faith.

But it is well to try to be just to the mother who bore us, even when we think we discover her in serious fault. The Christian religion in some form or other has been the spiritual mother of us all. We owe her an immeasurable debt for a spiritual nurture, the value of which but grows the more apparent as we separate the wheat from the chaff. We must

be uncompromising with the chaff, if we would save the wheat from being thrown away with it.

In the doctrine of faith commonly taught in the Christian churches there are two easily distinguishable elements which have an absolutely inverse value. The one element is a certain attitude of mind and heart. It is the spirit that dares greatly and persists unconquerably because it believes in the communication to it of a strength not initially its own, but capable of being made its own by the act that reckons on the strength being given. There is nothing irrational, nothing occult, nothing mystic, in this faith. It is a practical belief in the moral order of the universe. It is the belief that if we only will what we ought, we shall always will what we can. It is the belief that man was meant to grow, and that man can and does grow by trying. It is the belief that to try to do the best we know is to develop according to our nature as human beings. It is the belief that just as the atmosphere, the sunshine, the chemical properties of the soil and water, enter into the plant and give it a strength not of itself but communicated to it, so the moral atmosphere in which we live, the characteristics of the community of which we are members, enter into us, and communicate to us a strength not our own, but capable of being made our own by thought and action.

This is the truly valuable element in Christian faith. This is a doctrine which we prove to be true every day we live.

We shall be on solid ground so long as we appeal to experience to prove to us the existence of this faith and the justification or verification of it in daily life. The man who feels quite certain that goodness is goodness, that it is better to be sober than drunk, better to be honest than a rogue, better to be pure than evil-hearted; the man who feels that it lies in him to will the right and that he will grow stronger and more capable the more he tries to do the best he knows; this is the man who can, and the only man who can, do what is right. By faith we are saved from moral and intellectual impotence, not by faith in the irrational, but by faith in ourselves and in the possibilities of our nature.

Now faith in the possibilities of our nature is faith in an ordered universe, or system, of which we are parts. The man, therefore, who believes in the reality of goodness, and who believes at the same time in an ordered system or world (and these two beliefs are really inevitable in the normal and unsophisticated mind), this man believes, whether he knows it or not, that the soul of the universe is good, that he can trust it and can identify his will with it. Every time he wills what is good he does thereby identify his will with the power of the universe. This identification, when it is conscious and rapturous, is religion.

As I have said, we are on solid ground, whether we be Christians or free-thinkers, in appealing to experience to prove our dependence on faith. But the human mind is so constituted that it is forever on the quest seeking a reason for the faith that is in it, seeking for some explanation of that which it finds. Many have been the attempts to explain this moral faith, and many have been the failures. The explanation with which we are familiar in the churches is one of these failures. When historic Christianity first tried to give a reason for its faith, this faith had already reached a very advanced stage of development. Attention had been centred on it. It was felt to be the central fact in life. It was seen to be the essential element in morality, the essential element in religion. Finding themselves face to face with an antagonistic and sceptical intellectualism, the Christians were forced into an attempt to account for that faith which, spreading as it did like wild fire in hearts ready to receive its message, was yet to the learned Jews a stumbling-block and to the learned Greeks foolishness. The gospel became identified with its greatest teacher. But that teacher was so great, so simple, so profound, that his followers failed to grasp his doctrine as it was. The profoundest truths are often so simple in their expression that we, in our learned ignorance, scorn their simplicity. The message of Jesus became an *ipse dixit*. He was not regarded as a link in a chain of natural spiritual development; he was not looked upon simply as our greater brother; he became something abnormal, something miraculous; he drew his

inspiration from a source not open to other men; he attested his unique authority, it was said, by miracle, *i.e.*, by acts in direct opposition to, in direct contravention of, the order of the universe. The ultimate appeal, therefore, for belief in the doctrine of Jesus became an appeal for belief in these "proofs" of his authority, of his superiority to humanity. His words were readily misconstrued to fit with this view. "My Father and I are one," said Jesus, uttering the profoundest truth of all philosophy and of all religion. But this was understood to mean the special differentiation of Jesus from all humanity, not—as it ought to be understood to mean—the universal inclusion or participation of all humanity in the deity. This spiritual doctrine was the explanation given by Jesus of the moral life. "My Father and I are one" is the highest point touched by the religious soul. This implies a spiritual universe in which we, as spirits, play our part. It is this universal spirit in whom we live and move and have our being. It is because of this, because of the spiritual nature of reality, because of our participation as spirits in that reality, that knowledge is possible to us, that we can think, that we can lay plans and act upon them, that we can grow in goodness, strength, and knowledge, and that we can feel that action, knowledge, and growth are possible.

But this is a doctrine which in its purity is not easy of acceptance by the natural man. One can understand how, under the magnetic influence of a great personality, it would be acquiesced in unquestioningly by religious and uncritical natures. One can imagine how the tremendous, unrivalled, and unsurpassable, power of the doctrine to inspire and console would carry all before it in a world in which sin and sorrow always abound.

In days when natural science was not taught in elementary schools, in days when scientific primers could not be bought for a few pence, and when every man did not think himself as well entitled to an opinion on every subject as anybody else, it did not matter that these wonderful glad tidings were bound up with a necessary acceptance of miracle. It did not matter—and it does not matter to thousands to-day—that the

doctrine, as conceived by them, was and is pure mysticism ; it does not matter to such folk that they can't understand how it is true, or what the *rationale* of the doctrine may be ; it brings joy to their hearts and strength and efficiency to their lives ; it makes them better men and women to believe in it ; when they live the life they are convinced of the doctrine, and—for them of the olden time—if the curious or sceptical asked questions, was there not an organized and recognized body of expert teachers to whom such questions could be referred, and whose authority as to the trustworthiness of the doctrine in the eyes of the learned was a sufficient guarantee to the unlearned in any stirrings of criticism which might occur ? When such a body of authority existed, when the value of the doctrine was proved every day in practical life, what more could any one want ?

I am not sure that many of us would want more than such assurance. But in process of time the authority of the teachers to whom I have referred has been shaken. Natural science has grown with rapid development and been greeted with eager welcome. And natural science refuses its acceptance to much that has been accepted by theology and bound up by theology with the spiritual doctrine of Jesus. A new authority has been established, a rival who disputes the supremacy of the old.

What now becomes of the unfortunate person who has no time, and perhaps no capacity, to investigate the ultimates of either theology or natural science ?

Of authority it is apt to be true, whatever it may be of love, that “Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.” The man who believes a teacher, the value of whose teaching he has on other matters been taught to doubt, is apt to believe on extraneous evidence, or else to reject the teaching altogether. In other words, the teacher has lost authority. Now this has been largely the case with theology. Its claims and its teachings have been disallowed over and over again by teachers of natural science, and theology has bowed to science, has accepted the rebuke, and stands, on its own confession, a discredited authority. The teachers of natural

science, on the other hand, carried away, perhaps, by their own success, and by the triumphs of their own methods within their own province, have overstepped somewhat the limits of the sphere to which those methods properly belong, and within which they are properly absolute, and they have not been slow to throw doubt upon, if not to meet with downright denial, that spiritual doctrine of Jesus which it has been the special business of theology to defend and explain.

The simple person then finds himself in this dilemma. He cannot any longer accept the authority of theology. That authority has been discredited by a powerful and triumphant rival, and theology has owned itself discomfited. At the same time he acknowledges that all that was best in life centred round the teaching of theology. Its great rival, on the other hand, is either silent on this central interest of life, or it induces a doubt as to the reality of that out of which joy and hope and strength have flowed. What can he do?

Some have clung to theology because of the "comfort" of it. But a comfort, the reality of which one can by any possibility doubt, is precisely the kind of comfort that will fail us when we need it most. Some have accepted the *impasse*. There are things, they say, we cannot know. We must accept our ignorance; morality remains; we must try to promote the general happiness.

Far be it from me to say that a good and noble life cannot be lived by those who adopt the latter position. That it can be and is so lived by many, I know well. But for such as these there has passed away a glory from the earth. When we are well and active, when our interests are vivid and our lives busy, we may not miss greatly that which we have lost. But our hours of reflection do not bring us the old solace, we fight what we feel may be a losing battle. We are at best, in the figure of John Mill, a band of brothers hand in hand against an inscrutable, it may be a hostile, fate. We are continually thrown back on the endeavor to form empirical judgments of life. We arraign the great unknown power of the universe before the bar of our own moral standard. We ask ourselves whether we should have had the hardihood, if

we had had the power, to bring into existence a world like this with sorrow and suffering and uncertainty all about? And our answer is not reassuring. We feel continually that hope is what we are most in need of. We find that belief in human nature and its possibilities is that without which we cannot get on; but we find that this is precisely that which it is most difficult to get.

Here, then, is another attempted explanation which has failed.

Theology, we found, had failed, though it held the clue in its hand. It failed because it sought its answer in the wrong direction. Natural science, we now find, while discrediting the answer of theology, sought its own in a precisely similar direction,—*i.e.*, it asked the historical antecedent of our moral faith, and found itself embarked upon a course that ended in agnosticism. Now, whatever else agnosticism may be, it is a frank confession of failure to answer our question.

Are we then committed to the failure of agnosticism? Is our only alternative a blind leap into the arms of superstition? I do not think that we are left so forlorn.

I have said that theology held in its hand the clue. But it is assuredly not theology that is capable of appreciating its own treasure or of demonstrating its value.

The spiritual doctrine of Jesus, "My Father and I are one," is not unique to the carpenter of Nazareth. We may well yield all honor to the name of him who made it current coin; but this doctrine of the spiritual nature of the universe and of our participation as spirits in that nature has been the common property of idealistic philosophers from Plato's time to our own, and is taught with irresistible power by that philosophy. This is a sure and certain ground of hope; this is a sure and certain ground of trust. But our problem to-day is, how to make it current coin again. I do not know how that will be done. But I do know that it needs doing. It may be done by the preaching of a purified Christianity. It may be done by the gradual development of a body of authoritative philosophic teaching which will play the part in practical life that theology was called upon to play, but failed in playing.

It may be that some poet will be born for whom once more the heart of the universe will be musical; who, having seen life steadily and seen it whole, can report that all is beauty; who, being a poet of our own time, can resolve our discords as the wisdom of no forerunner can resolve them, and educe therefrom a fuller, richer, profounder, harmony than the world has yet rejoiced in.

This, then, is in baldest outline the explanation given by idealistic philosophy of that temper or practical belief which you and I know we have when we are at our best, which we know as characteristic of all the best people we know, and which is necessary in some degree, at least, before any single thought or conscious act, even the smallest, is possible. The most careful analysis of this faith shows it to be possible only to a spiritual being developing in time and identical in kind, though not in degree, with the great world-spirit in relation to which we live and develop.

The world remains the same, whatever be our creed. Society surrounds us and moulds us by its demands, its gifts, its refusals. The same duties are laid upon us and the same fields of interest are open before us. But the spirit in which we meet the world will make all the difference. Is the world alien and hostile? Is it "a charnel-house" or—"my Father's"? Are we and our fellows hopeless and helpless in face of an inscrutable fate? May truth be perhaps a delusion, and beauty only a snare? or—may we know that the world means intensely and means good? May we have the assurance that the universe is ultimately rational, and that to be perfectly rational means to be perfectly beautiful and perfectly good? May we have a rational justification for this sublime and soul-inspiring faith? I believe with all my heart and soul that we have this justification. If we live the life we shall know of the doctrine; the life has two sides, and these sides are true and faithful living and bold and faithful thinking.

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